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ABSTRACT

Volunteers play an important role in the activities of the Extension Service. The number of volunteers is increasing, as are the types of jobs they do. However, there are some typical problems in Extension volunteerism. A survey of county Extension agents identified the following problems related to management of Extension volunteers: lack of commitment, nonsystematic training, unrealistic expectations, lack of written statements, personality clashes, lack of recognition, and lack of supervision of volunteers. Many of these problems can be handled by applying management principles. Management functions that can improve a volunteer program include planning, organizing, staffing (recruiting and training volunteers), directing volunteer activities, and controling (evaluating) volunteers and providing recognition for them. Extension agents must be realistic in the management approach and not become overly ambitious in introducing these techniques in Extension volunteerism. However, a systematic approach can reduce the major concerns associated with the management of Extension volunteers. (KC)

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MANAGEMENT OF EXTENSION VOLUNTEERS

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MANAGEMENT OF EXTENSION VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers have long played a multiple function in conducting education programs of the Cooperative Extension Service. In 1983, about 2.9 million individuals work with Extension as volunteers and they have spent about 51 days for each working day spent by Extension agents.[1] Volunteers were used by Extension agents as identifiers, hosts, teachers, program planners, fund raisers, and services providers in a manner relevant to farmers, homemakers, business persons, youth, and community citizens. Volunteerism is just as important to Extension today as it was during its pioneer days. As many Extension agents expressed in informal conversations, the continuing problem today is how to involve volunteers more effectively to serve the growing demand for Extension services from the community and individuals and still be accountable for the Cooperative Extension Service activities at the local level. Consequently, the best approach to overcome the deep-rooted concern is through greater emphasis on the importance of a management plan for the Extension's volunteers.

Extension Volunteers

Extension volunteers can be identified as any person of any age who assists the Extension in the areas of agriculture, home economics, community development, and youth programs and who expect no

financial gain for their time, effort, funds, materials, skills, and knowledge. Numerous changes are occurring in Extension volunteerism and it is expanding both in number and activities. Volunteer development has been included in the job responsibilities of Virginia Extension personnel. The Accountability and Evaluation Council of the Cooperative Extension Service designated volunteerism as one of the five high priority topics for impact evaluation.[2] A national study on implications of volunteerism in Extension is being conducted with a grant from the Extension Service-USDA.[3] Although new resources, networks, and coalitions are being developed, many more changes are due to occur in Extension volunteerism. The Extension personnel must be a part of molding those changes and in designing volunteer models for the future. However, during our years of association with Extension personnel and volunteers, we have found several problems between the two parties.

Typical Problems in Extension Volunteerism

The number of people willing to volunteer time to Extension can be expected to increase substantially in the coming years. According to a national survey on the impact of volunteerism, the number of Extension volunteers per county range from 38 to 18,000 with average of 266 volunteers per county agent. The county agents claim that they are spending a minimum of 20% of their time in activities related to volunteers in Extension. In analyzing the data on agents' responses, the following problems which are related to management of Extension Volunteers have been identified: lack of commitment, non-systematic

training, unrealistic expectations, lack of written statements, personality clashes, lack of recognition, and lack of supervision of volunteers. Given the data, let us explain what agents might mean by these categories. Experiences in Extension and study of volunteerism leads to the following thoughts:

1. Lack of Commitment

Extension volunteer systems as now operated, seem to have an open door policy by which volunteers enter and drop randomly. Volunteers can drop out at a critical time, just as they can enter when they are most needed. Sometimes, Extension agents work with unreliable volunteers who do not commit their effort and time to the Extension organization. Building the commitment among volunteers must be a key issue in the management of Extension volunteers.

2. Non-systematic Training

Neither Extension agents nor the Extension system has a definite and systematic procedure for the selection and placement of volunteers in various activities except in a few selected categories such as Master Volunteers and 4-H Project Leaders. In many instances, the suitability of volunteers is not checked and ensured. Extension agents may have more volunteers than they can utilize at a time of low need, and none or not enough during a peak demand period. Mismatch of talents, knowledge, and skills of volunteers are less likely to achieve the intended outcome through volunteer activities.

3. Unrealistic Expectations

When volunteers are not carefully screened and selected for appropriate Extension activities, they may be seeking something in the activities that does not exist, and thus are unable to fulfill their expectations. On the other hand, Extension agents are highly motivated toward the achievement of objectives; thus, their desire to get things done causes frustration among volunteers who, while willing, are left out of much of the decision making and other Extension activities. This frustration is quickly evidenced by a high rate of volunteer drop out. On the other hand, too often, the same volunteers are called upon again and again to participate in a wide variety of Extension educational activities. This, of course, produces the classic problem of "rapid burn out" of volunteers. Furthermore, some Extension agents may believe that volunteers are free labor and that any old job can be dumped on them. Both Extension agents and volunteers must work to develop feasible expectations that are acceptable to the Extension organization and the philosophy of volunteerism.

4. Lack of Written Statements

Extension volunteers experience a lack of written statements on policies, procedures, volunteer code of ethics, standards of performance, and job responsibilities. It is impossible for Extension agents to have a span of control over volunteers without such policies, procedures, and job responsibilities. Without appealing job responsibilities and policies, there would be no reliable volunteers.

Without job descriptions, organizational charts, supervisory lines and clear goal expectations there can be no management of volunteers or Extension programs.

5. Personality Clashes

Some Extension agents no longer want to utilize volunteers in their Extension programs as evidence by their reluctance to start or expand volunteer involvement. In some situations, Extension agents seem to be threatened by volunteers, either because they are afraid of loosing their jobs to volunteers or because they recognize that volunteers can give something, especially care and attention, to clients that cannot be compensated by salary. Cross-purposes and conflicts of interest with clients may occur due to a lack of coordination and communication between Extension agents and volunteers. The bond that holds agents and volunteers together are often dependent on strong affiliations. A minor disagreement at any level can easily escalate and cause a major rift in the bond and result in damage to Extension image and programs.

6. Lack of Recognition

Rewards and motives of a non-financial nature are valuable, especially in dealing with the Extension volunteers. People need to be appreciated and praised to their contributions. Many agents are not prepared to provide this recognition for their volunteers. Lack of recognition and appreciation may lead to a loss of volunteers and a reduction in the total Extension effort. When volunteers are not wisely utilized other parts of the programs are affected such as a loss of

community connections, participation at educational events, and resources available from the community to support the overall programs.

7. Lack of Supervision of Volunteers

Supervision, the chief tool of control, is frequently overlooked and misused in many volunteer activities in Extension. Extension agents fail to see the volunteers as a part of the team. In many situations, problems can occur when the Extension agents expect volunteers to become productive immediately with only limited training opportunities.

These problems are challenges to Extension agents as they work with volunteers. Many of these problems can be handled by applying management principles. That is, bringing desired changes in Extension volunteerism through management practices (from what they are to what they can become in the future) is an important activity.

Implications of Management

Many of the issues facing Extension volunteerism are profound, complex, and affect the entire Cooperative Extension Service. If one reason could be isolated as causing Extension volunteerism to fail, it would be the lack of an adequate volunteer management system; that is, a systematic approach to effectively involving volunteers for development and the delivery of Extension information to the appropriate person at the time needed. Obviously, no totally comprehensive volunteer management strategy is available at present; however, a systematic approach in the management of Extension volunteers can reduce the key issues related to Extension volunteerism.

Management is a process of working with and through others to accomplish goals.[4] Accordingly, good management of volunteers; optimum use of time, money, and knowledge and skills of volunteers; involves functions of planning, organizing, staffing, guiding/directing, and controlling.

Relevance of Management Functions for Extension Volunteers

Management of Extension volunteers presents its own unique issues. Clearly defined management strategies have not been developed for the volunteer sector. Although much of the business management functions can be translated for the Extension volunteers, they must always be done cognizant of the fact that volunteers are volunteers. Based on the above assumptions, let us examine each of these functions briefly from the point of view of management of Extension volunteers.

Planning

Planning is fundamentally a determining of who is going to do what, when, and how.[5] It helps managers to understand what is being done now and what has to be done to bring about desired changes. Extension personnel as managers must recognize the value of planning and its inextricable relationship to the achievement of goals and objectives of Extension volunteerism. It is better for Extension managers to develop a plan for volunteer involvement through appropriate programs which are feasible, contribute positively to organizations, and provide positive satisfaction for volunteers. Without an appealing purpose and objectives for volunteer participation and

activities, there would be no voluntarily contributed time, resources, and talents to the Extension organization. We have witnessed many Extension volunteer efforts that have been launched with a cause, but not a plan. Lack of planning may lead to confusion over goals and objectives, rapid turnover of volunteers, burning out of volunteers and difficulties in getting things done.

Organizing

Organizing is assigning activities identified during the planning process that are needed to accomplish the objectives of Extension volunteerism. Assigning activities involves responsibility delegation and coordination. Extension personnel must have confidence in volunteers and seek their time and talents to use them effectively in Extension volunteer activities. Extension agents should be glad, and not feel threatened, to delegate a significant part of their programs' activities to qualified and reliable volunteers. Extension personnel must be an enabler of human resources available in the Extension organization. The time spent by Extension personnel in doing one job can be spent enabling several people to do numerous jobs. Once delegation of time and knowledge is done, management becomes not only desirable, but also encourages fresh ideas, commitment, responsibilities, and a sense of ownership from Extension volunteers.

Coordination is a process of monitoring what is going on between Extension personnel and volunteers. Every opportunity for building cooperation between them must be encouraged by both parties. Coordination of efforts will eliminate cross-purposes, duplication of

activities, and conflict of interests. Better two way communication is a linking pin in coordinating Extension volunteer activities successfully. The key for successful delegation and coordination is to find reliable, knowledgeable, and motivated volunteers and then delegate and coordinate the Extension activities.

Staffing

Many larger not-for-profit organizations have a definite plan for recruiting, selecting, training, and assigning volunteers for appropriate activities.[6] The Extension organization must have a plan that leads to a process of designing volunteer activities as well as developing a powerful message about why participation of volunteers is important in the Extension organization. Such a recruitment effort will lead Extension agents into the process of selecting volunteers according to their abilities and interests for the kind of volunteer activities available. Development of an effective recruitment message including statement of need, job description, and benefits is a crucial factor in the recruitment of volunteers. It is desirable to have an orientation session which provides a clear, concise overview of the Extension organization, its purpose, policies, and procedures, financial support, and other assistance. Following the orientation, on-the-job training must be given to volunteers. This training will give them an opportunity to acquire needed information for their assignment, new skills, or improve the ones they already have through new learning experiences in real life situations. On-the-job training may be done on an individual or group basis.

Interests, personality, knowledge, and skills of volunteers should be matched in the process of placing volunteers in all four service areas of the Extension organization. Such a placement holds the potential to offer rewarding and satisfying volunteer experiences that benefit both the Extension agency and the volunteers. Furthermore, volunteers get greater satisfaction from their work. The Extension agent's role will also change from being the person who assigns volunteers to clients and then tries desperately to keep them interested in what they are doing to becoming a resource person for volunteers. With this kind of volunteer program in place, Extension agents will spend less time recruiting because reduced turnover among volunteers.

Directing

Directing is the process of helping volunteers to accomplish their activities. Extension volunteers need to feel sense of ownership regarding project. There are many such examples of volunteer activities in which Extension agents must claim 'belonging and ownership.' Extension volunteers must be encouraged to participate in planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating their activities so that they can feel ownership in what they do. Extension personnel must develop a work structure that encourages excellence and make sure that volunteers are held responsible for achieving results rather than for performing a set of activities. Volunteers must be directed to focus on the end-product of what they do, and thus they get the satisfaction of making progress in their activities. Volunteers who do not get clear guidance from Extension personnel get bored, lose

interest, and eventually dropout. Therefore, in directing the volunteers, Extension agents and volunteers supervising other volunteers must keep them interested and motivated.

Controlling

Perhaps the most important but least considered factor in Extension volunteerism is the controlling or evaluation of volunteer activities. Management literatures uses controlling to mean doing all that is necessary beyond the plan and process (directing) to make sure the desired outcomes are achieved. Controlling helps to make sure activities are carried out and objectives are accomplished. Controlling may help Extension agents to check commitment, interest, responsibilities, and motivation of volunteers. It is possible and even desirable to have both formal and informal evaluation in volunteer activities. Informal evaluation may occur at any place and any time. It may even occur over a coffee break. Careful job design, recruitment, selection, and placement must be the basis for evaluation of Extension volunteers. Extension agents must accept the fact that controlling volunteers takes time and energy. Another aspects of controlling is being sure the volunteer has the materials, tools, and resources to do the specified job. Many Extension volunteers say they do not always have the bulletins, outlines, demonstration materials, etc. when they need them.

During the controlling process, Extension agents must make sure volunteers get the recognition and appreciation that is due. We have found that when Extension agents offer time for informal discussion of

problems, or listen to and accept volunteers' suggestions, not only do Extension agents gather feedback on volunteer activities, but also the volunteers get the feeling of being useful and appreciated. Further, having a certain degree of control over volunteer activities will be tremendously rewarding for the Extension clients indirectly. However, Extension agents should realize that a volunteer job is seldom one's first priority, and they may need to be more flexible in when the volunteer job can be performed. Research shows that once a volunteer has made a commitment, he/she will carry it out. Volunteers matched with paid staff in many similar jobs have less absenteeism and are made reliable than paid staff. Thus, the Extension agent must maintain a balance between the needs of the volunteers and the needs of the Extension organization. A constructive evaluation of volunteers is vital both for improving their job performance and for increasing their commitment to the organization.

Conclusion

Management is a growing concern in not-for-profit voluntary enterprises simply because it has been a glaring weakness in the past. However, many predict that management of volunteerism is going to be the new frontier for the rest of the century.

Good management of Extension volunteers is important when, generally, Extension agents claim that they already have very tight time schedules as a result of participating in voluntary activities at the local level. Adopting management principles in Extension volunteerism will provide an opportunity for Extension organizations to bring about

constructive changes in future volunteer activities. Further, while both clients and volunteer community work for the Extension are growing on one hand, the demand from other human service not-for-profit voluntary enterprises for Extension services on volunteer development is increasing on the other hand. Extension personnel must find a way to involve volunteers in a well managed Extension program process. It is not the clients, nor the volunteers, but the Extension agents who need to find time to give leadership to this volunteer involved program development and delivery process.

In managing Extension volunteers, Extension personnel must be able to differentiate various categories of volunteers along with their interest and commitment. If a volunteer joins and agrees to participate in Extension volunteerism based upon his/her attraction to the goals and purposes of the Extension organization, s/he is making only a philosophical commitment and may not be motivated to participate by providing time, energy, and resources to Extension related activities. In this situation, the Extension agent, as a manager, cannot assume that this volunteer is necessarily willing to perform voluntary functions to the Extension service. Extension agents must be realistic in the management approach and not become overly ambitious in introducing them in Extension volunteerism. However, a systematic approach can reduce the major concerns associated with the management of Extension volunteers.

FOOTNOTES

1. Implications of Volunteerism in Extension, Community Volunteers, Cooperative Extension Agents: Partners in Action. (University of Wisconsin, Department of Continuing and Vocational Education, November, 1984).

2. USDA/NASULGC, Extension in the '80s: A Perspectives for the Future of the Cooperative Extension Service. (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Cooperative Extension Service, 1983).

3. Implication of Volunteerism in Extension, Community Volunteers, Cooperative Extension Agents: Phase I - Agents View, Finding, Conclusion, and Implications, (University of Wisconsin, Department of Continuing and Vocational Education, June 1985).

4. M. Wilson, The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs, (Boulder, CO: Johnson Publishing Company, 1976).

5. D.E. Mason, Voluntary Nonprofit Enterprise Management, (New York: Plenum Press, 1984).

6. J. M. Stone, How to Volunteer in Social Service Agencies, (Springfield,IL: Charles C. Thomas, Publishers, 1982).